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SUBJECT: GRAND SHAYKH OF AL AZHAR ON EXTREMISM AND IRAQ

Sensitive but unclassified. Not for internet distribution.

¶1. (SBU) In a September 5 meeting, the Shaykh of Al Azhar, Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, stressed to the Ambassador his focus on the need for tolerance, cooperation, and understanding between religions. Asserting that "all humans are brothers," the Shaykh decried violence in the name of religion, and highlighted that as soon as he learned of the attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001, he issued a statement from Al Azhar on the same day, condemning the perpetrators as "criminals, who have perverted religion and humanity." Queried repeatedly by the Ambassador as to the compatibility between the principles of Islam and democracy, Tantawi did not directly respond, noting instead that religion leads people to see the "negativity of oppression." The Shaykh was appreciative of Embassy coordination regarding the travel of Egyptian imams to the U.S. during Ramadan. The Ambassador discussed President Bush's June 27 speech at the Islamic Center of Washington, to which Tantawi replied that he has great personal respect for President Bush, "although not his policies," terming the President a "religious man."

¶2. (SBU) Tantawi said that he has issued statements calling on Iraqis to unite "at least 13 or 14 times." Opining that "the problem in Iraq is not just one of Sunni versus Shi'a, but of deep hatreds, resentments and greediness," the Shaykh said that, "you and I can only encourage the Iraqis towards reconciliation, but they must do the uniting themselves ... I always tell them, whenever there is an Iraqi delegation to Al Azhar, you are children of the same country, you must come together and stop this killing." Calling developments in Iraq "a black night," Tantawi said that "we can only hope that things will get better day by day, God willing."

¶3. (SBU) The Shaykh, after being introduced to our new Library of Congress (LOC) representative, Dr. Fawzi Tadros, mentioned that he had previously visited the LOC while serving as Mufti of the Republic ("it is the greatest library in the world"), and that he hopes to visit the U.S. and the LOC again soon, and submit his personal writings to the LOC.

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